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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000472

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; GENEVA FOR RMA

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SUBJECT: CAMBODIA: MORE ON RANARIDDH'S RESIGNATION

REF: REFTEL: PHNOM PENH 460

Classified By: Poloff Brent Soderborg, Reason 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (C) Summary. FUNCINPEC Deputy Secretary General Ung Huot says that Prince Ranariddh's decision last week to resign as National Assembly President was based principally on a desire to concentrate more on strengthening the party, but Hun Sen's personal attacks and the danger that he might be voted out of the Assembly presidency under the new 50% plus one rule were also considerations. Huot emphasized the FUNCINPEC view that Ranariddh getting out and seeing the people might help reverse FUNCINPEC'S decline and benefit the party in the 2007 commune elections and the 2008 general election. End Summary.

FUNCINPEC: Focusing on Upcoming Elections

¶12. (C) On March 8, FUNCINPEC official Ung Huot, accompanied by his assistant Sander Demontero, met with DCM and Poloff on behalf of Prince Ranariddh and FUNCINPEC to explain the reasons for Ranariddh's decision last week to resign as National Assembly President. As reported reftel, Huot stated that the Prince was too busy with his duties presiding over the National Assembly, and as party President needs to be more involved to stop the declining popular support for FUNCINPEC. Following his resignation, Ranariddh immediately started reorganizing the party, proposing that party Inspector General Prince Chakrapong and party Secretary General Prince Sirivudh swap positions within FUNCINPEC, and nominating four deputy secretaries-general: Chhim Seak Leng, Por Bun Sreu, Tea Chamrat, and Ung Huot. Huot said Ranariddh's greater involvement will revitalize the party and it is important that Ranariddh has the will to make changes. He cited the 2004 IRI poll that showed Ranariddh had a 67% approval rating (the highest rating of any politician in the survey) while FUNCINPEC only got about 18% of the popular vote. If Ranariddh can boost FUNCINPEC supporters' morale, the party's chances in the 2007 communal elections look very good. Huot indicated that while FUNCINPEC's platform for the 2007/2008 elections would remain based on the monarchy, development of democracy, and fighting poverty, the party's tactics will change, with Ranariddh himself getting out into the provinces to shore up local support. If FUNCINPEC can win 40 seats in the 2008 election; in Huot's words, Hun Sen won't be able to kick FUNCINPEC around anymore.

¶13. (C) Huot referred to the Constitutional change in the two-thirds majority rule in parliament as another factor in Ranariddh's resignation. Huot said that since 2003, Hun Sen has felt like a hostage to FUNCINPEC and the two-thirds rule. With 50% plus one now in effect, Hun Sen can shuffle the Cabinet at will, since the CPP has 73 seats and only 63 votes are required. Although it was uncertain that the CPP would

actually propose to have him removed, Ranariddh felt that he could easily have been voted out, so he resigned as a preemptive move. Cambodia should be ready for political instability or true democracy, Huot said, because in the new system a simple majority in the parliament could vote Hun Sen himself out of office.

¶4. (C) Although he feels personally insulted by Hun Sen's accusations of corruption and the improper role of a mistress, neither of which is new to Cambodian politics, Ranariddh wants the coalition to continue through the end of the current term. Huot noted Sam Rainsy's "new face" since returning, and how Rainsy made up with Hun Sen saying he was wrong to criticize the PM all those years. Rainsy then proposed the 50% plus one rule for parliament and Hun Sen agreed. Huot said that with 50% plus one, FUNCINPEC can do little if Hun Sen and the CPP want to invite Sam Rainsy into the government; but in his view, the CPP would not do something that stupid and Rainsy would not be brought into the government before 2008.

¶5. (C) At the end of the meeting, Huot noted that there appears to be a love-hate relationship between the United States and FUNCINPEC. The USG and, in particular, specific members of Congress, had been too hard on FUNCINPEC, and relations are not as good as they once were. DCM noted that the USG probably has more friends in FUNCINPEC than any other party in Cambodia and wants to maintain close relations with FUNCINPEC. However, he emphasized that the United States supports the democratic process and does not endorse one party over another.

Comment

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¶6. (C) Ranariddh and FUNCINPEC are perhaps reading too much into the two year-old IRI survey results and ignoring the realities of the current Cambodian political climate. While Ranariddh's campaigning late in the 2003 election cycle did appear to pay some dividends for FUNCINPEC, it is unlikely that his personal charisma can have the same effect in the coming elections. FUNCINPEC still needs to establish an independent identity and demonstrate it can deliver on issues constituents care about.

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